



Pack your patience. Leave your ego at home.

One man's story of Hurricane Katrina recovery duty.

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The morning after Hurricane Isabel struck my hometown of Annapolis, Md., on September 19, 2003, my wife and I ventured downtown to look at the damage done by a storm surge that was estimated to be between eight and 14 feet. The water had gone about 300 feet up the gentle slope of Main Street. Down by the City Dock, the water was up to the door handle on Stevens Hardware. People were casually rowing their dinghies as if on an afternoon stroll, and we counted eight Labrador retrievers splashing around, chasing after tennis balls at the circle by the Market Space. Despite the calm acceptance, it was still an incredible sight. Or, so I thought.

Just a few weeks shy of two years later, I volunteered through the Coast Guard to assist the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) with Hurricane Katrina's relief and recovery efforts along the Gulf Coast. I had

been a charter employee of FEMA when it was created by President Carter in 1979, and, years later, after being the Chief of Marine Corps Fire and Rescue Services for nine years, I returned to FEMA as a senior executive political appointee, serving as Superintendent of the National Fire Academy. I expected that my 27 years of fire service experience and

my FEMA background would be valuable assets to the operations in Louisiana. Even though this was true, there were still many surprises ahead for me.

The first leg of my journey was to my old home, the

National Fire Academy, in Emmitsburg, Md., to in-process and be given an orientation brief. We were given one day to shop for specialized gear such as safety shoes, ponchos, flashlights, sunscreen, filter masks, latex gloves, and bug repellant and, then, given 24 hours to get to the FEMA Long Range Recovery Center (LRRC) in Orlando, Fla., for screening, just-in-time training, and deployment.

Still miles from the disaster, LRRC was a sight to behold. It was a large building that was a combination of offices and warehouse areas. The place was buzzing with all sorts of recovery workers like me who were busy going to briefings, getting shots for hepatitis and tetanus, and meeting our teams. As expected, there was some "hurry up and wait" and the types of



The FEMA Joint Field Office in Baton Rouge, La., buzzes with activity.

assignments ranged from handing out fliers to the public to highly specialized, technical positions. Patience was essential here, and, as I would learn, critical to success throughout the duration of the mission.

The FEMA Long Range Recovery Center was a logistics miracle. Thousands of desks, phones, and computers were all set up and operating within days after the storm. Likewise, the LRRC training and office staff came across like old pros who had rehearsed their lines long before we arrived.

Off to Mission Impossible

When the screening people saw that I had an engineering degree, I was pulled out of class and deployed to the Joint Field Office (JFO) in Baton Rouge, La., because they desperately needed engineers in the logistics operation. That was okay, since I had some logistics experience from my days in the Army Reserve. When I reached JFO, where state and federal officials work side by side, I was in awe. The Joint Field Office was in a vacant department store that I was told was once one of the largest department stores in America. There were about 1,500 people working at folding tables, with wire strung everywhere, and phones ringing nonstop. Originally, I was assigned to operate a warehouse in the New Orleans area, but the section chief took a look at my qualifications and recognized that I could be better utilized elsewhere. He made a few calls, and I ended up working in the FEMA Public Assistance Program to restore public buildings, roads, and other public infrastructure.

I was assigned to a team comprised of two other engineers and deployed to Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport in Kenner, La., to help get the airport reopened. My first job was to assess damage to the Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting (ARFF) Station and make recommendations for alternative ARFF coverage, if necessary. The ARFF facility had to be operational for the airport to reopen.

Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport

Enroute to the airport on the morning of September 14, I read FEMA manuals to understand the process and the paperwork needed to get the New Orleans Airport Authority the funds they needed to repair and reopen the airport. We arrived at the airport to the eerie sight of a double line of ambulances parked the entire length of the departures level. I would later learn that the airport had been the triage and treatment area for thousands of people evacuated from the flood waters. In addition, there had been approximately 20,000 passengers and refugees living in the concourses for nearly a week, without clean water, adequate ventilation, or plumbing.

In the baggage claim area, as you walked from one

end of the terminal to the other, the utilization of the carousels went from sleep facilities to triage and ambulatory care, then to non-ambulatory care to finally, the last carousel, which had served as a morgue. All that was left when I arrived were the Air Force security folks sleeping on carousels 6 through 8. Meanwhile, 7,200 Army troops from the 82nd Airborne Division were bivouacked at the long-term parking area and in every other nook and cranny out among the airport buildings. Numerous law enforcement personnel; a few dozen Forest Service personnel; and perhaps a dozen airport and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) folks, made homeless by the disaster, rounded out the population at Louis Armstrong.

On the tarmac between Concourses A and B, the Forest Service was running all of the support for the thousands of folks now on duty at the airport. A huge (300 ft. by 100 ft.) tent nicknamed the Grand Ballroom served as the dining facility. Food service trailers opened for breakfast at 5 a.m. and served the last hot dinner at 9 p.m. In addition, the tarmac was home to dozens of support personnel who prepared food, maintained the site, and did the laundry.

Fortunately, the ARFF facility was not damaged to the extent originally reported and was operational. To my delight, I would be working with an old colleague from my Marine Corps fire protection days, Chief Richard Blanchard, who had been a Navy installation fire chief before retiring and coming to the airport as Fire Chief.



A line of ambulances parked the entire length of the departures level at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport.



The baggage claim carousels at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport were used in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as a triage and medical care area.

We quickly got the paperwork done to repair the roof and replace six apparatus bay overhead doors. I spent the next several weeks working with the team at the airport, doing damage assessments with contractors and working with the airport executive staff, almost all of whom had been made homeless by this storm, and had been living in their offices (one with her two dogs and one cat) since August 27. They were a remarkable team, always pleasant and always professional and a delight to work with. Who would guess they were also dealing with such serious personal losses?

Into the Eye of the Storm

Around September 27, I was asked to be the liaison to the New Orleans Fire Department for the FEMA City of New Orleans Strike Team. This would be my first entry into the city. We started at the Hyatt hotel downtown, where the city had established its Emergency Operations Center. The building had been badly battered on the outside. Inside there were National Guard troops maintaining security. In the Emergency Operations Center were approximately 20 major organizational or functional groups, with clusters of tables. FEMA;



The Hyatt Hotel, downtown New Orleans, was badly battered by the storm.

Red Cross; Corps of Engineers; Infrastructure; Finance; Logistics; National Guard; Public Safety (Police, Fire, and EMS); Public Utilities; and Command Group were some of the major players. I worked at the fire tables of the Public Safety cluster, along with personnel from the New Orleans Fire Department (NOFD); the Knoxville, Tenn., Fire Department; and the U.S. Forest Service. It was wonderful to see the National Incident Command System fully operational and how well it seemed to interface with the National Response Plan.

The city did an excellent job running the Emergency Operations Center. Each morning began with a status report by all major agencies and functional areas involved with the rescue, relief, and recovery operations. Information such as daily mission objectives, weather forecasts, and status of critical infrastructure and services was disbursed. After the

status report, city department heads met with state and federal officials for a detailed infrastructure recovery review.

I was to work with the fire department to document damage to their fire apparatus, their buildings, and their equipment. The Forest Service guys were handling the operational resource requests through E-TEAM, an electronic resource request system, or EMAC, an electronic mutual aid compact between the state emergency management agencies. These two mechanisms could locate and tap into huge resources in a matter of hours. It was impressive.

Early in my assignment with the fire department, I went out to Unified Katrina Command for fire operations at Holy Cross College, a small women's college in the West Bank section of the city. It was

humbling to see fire fighters and fire apparatus from Illinois and New York City (FDNY) working together, 24-7, to help NOFD protect the citizens of New Orleans. The FDNY guys made me really proud. For the most part, their Incident Management Team



Air Force security personnel are housed in the baggage claim area of Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport.

organized and ran the operation. The planning and coordination was impeccable—what one would expect of a Marine Expeditionary Force. I took copies of their daily Incident Action Plan home for my local fire department to use.

Interesting Moments and Events

After about 33 days away from home, FEMA asked the Coast Guard if I could stay for another two months, and my superiors agreed to 45 days away from my full-time duties. I appreciated the opportunity to continue my work with the fire department, the people of New Orleans, and the outstanding cadre of FEMA people in the Public Assistance Program.

Just like my experience at the airport earlier, most of the local fire department folks were homeless, living on one of the Carnival Cruise Lines ships or with relatives. They worked the same long hours the FEMA people worked, and the work was difficult. The dimensions of the problems and their costs were enormous. For the fire department, most of their firehouses had been flooded, many requiring gutting and rehabilitation, some requiring total demolition. Most of their fire apparatus fleet was also damaged in some way, due to flooding.

As the city began to repopulate, traffic also became a problem. The majority of the intersections had no traffic signals, and we all had to stop, alternate which lanes got the 'go-ahead' and then look both ways again, when our turn came. Talk about delays!

Flat tires were a major concern. Storm debris was

everywhere; after the storm, debris continued to fall off any of the thousands of trucks hauling it out of the city.

Early on, the political bickering and finger pointing had all of us concerned. We were conscious about not wearing our FEMA shirts or FEMA identification badges after hours in public places like grocery stores. All of that has changed. Local officials are running into the same problems that FEMA had at the earliest stages of the

recovery and are telling their citizens the same things FEMA said then: "Please be patient. This is bigger than anything we've ever dealt with and we're doing the best we can."

There have been some funny moments and simply odd things that have happened while I was here. We were at a briefing when one FEMA person mentioned that he was having trouble getting to his hotel after work before the curfew went into effect at 8 p.m. The city official said that the New Orleans Police would honor our FEMA identification. The person said, "It's not the New Orleans Police that's the problem; the Minneapolis Police won't let me into the city."

On another night, I was waiting at a traffic light when a fire department pickup truck pulled up beside me. I was looking at the four grime-covered guys riding in the bed and then saw the lettering on the door of the truck: Menlo Park, Calif. Fire Department. A little far from home, aren't we? There were other odd sights, like 13 California Highway Patrol (CHiPs) cars, 30 Michigan State Police cars, a dozen or more New Jersey State Police cars, and enough cars from other police departments around the country to cover a football field. I saw several massive shopping center parking lots converted into campground/staging areas for hundreds of utility workers, along with their bucket trucks and huge stocks of supplies including telephone poles, transformers, and wire spools.

Road signs meant nothing during our travels; they were either missing or left twisted by the wind to give you the wrong route. One night I called a colleague



The tarmac at the airport was home to dozens of support personnel who prepared food, maintained the site, and did the laundry.



and asked him, "Rex, where are you?" There was a long pause as I guess he looked around for a street sign. Finally, he said, "From the best I can tell, I'm at the corner of Walk and Don't Walk."

On a personal level, the people of New Orleans have been a source of strength and encouragement for many of the relief and recovery workers here. Their courage is inspiring, their love and commitment to their city is unbelievable, and their focus on the future is steadfast. I have learned and grown immensely from this difficult and often heartbreaking experience. I am grateful to the Coast Guard for giving me the opportunity to do the good that I did and have this experience. I am thankful to the many wonderful people I had the chance to

work with. They will be a source of strength and inspiration for years to come. Finally, I am more proud to be an American than ever before in my life. The outpouring of people and resources for disaster relief defies description. It was America at its best.

Finally, we cannot forget our global neighbors. I saw Canadian volunteers as well as several groups from Europe. I'm sure there were many nations from around the world who sent people or resources, perhaps both. We need to remember how much they care about us and that we owe these people our thanks as well.

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The author documents damage to a New Orleans firehouse where 60-inch floodwaters destroyed two fire trucks and did nearly \$500,000 damage to the building.